

Decision Notice
For the Potential Addition to Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area
Madison Valley, Southwest Montana
Prepared by Region 3, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
October 21, 2015

Proposal

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) propose to purchase approximately 631.12 acres adjacent to Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WCWMA) using USFWS Pittman-Robinson and Habitat Montana funds totaling \$1,041,000. This land would be incorporated into the existing WCWMA and managed as part of the WMA. The parcel comprises grassland habitat of high conservation value, providing important wildlife habitat and winter range for elk and pronghorn.

Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) Process

The proposal was outlined by MFWP in an Environmental Assessment (EA). The purpose of the EA is to satisfy the letter and intent of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). MFWP is required through the MEPA process to assess the potential impacts of this project on the human and natural environment. The EA was the focus of a public meeting, distributed to interested parties, published in two local newspapers, posted on the MFWP website, and was available upon request. A 30-day public comment period on the proposal was held from September 15 to October 15, 2015.

The EA provides the MFWP Decision Maker (MFWP Region 3 Supervisor) with the best available information to assist in evaluating the project and deciding whether to approve, not approve, or modify the proposed action in a Decision Notice. The proposed action is then subject to approval by the MFWP Commission.

Issues Raised in the Environmental Assessment (EA)

The EA describes management issues and alternatives in detail including expected effects on the physical and human environment. The goal of proposed addition is to provide additional wildlife habitat and security to an important property adjacent to WCWMA. Air, water, and vegetation resources are expected to benefit through this purchase and subsequent management. Wildlife resources would benefit from the addition of this parcel through expanded secure winter habitat and habitat management when incorporated into WCWMA. The public would be able to enjoy the property through spring, summer, and fall recreation opportunities including wildlife watching, photography, hiking, and big game and upland bird hunting. The local tax revenue should not be impacted as MFWP pays taxes equivalent to what a private landowner would pay (MCA 87-1-603).

Summary of Public Comments

Five private parties and one agency submitted written comments. All comments were favorable to Alternative B – the proposal for FWP to purchase the lands and add them to WCWMA. One party asked questions about the process, but indicated no opinion toward either alternative.

Questions and Clarifications Derived During the Public Comment Period

Questions:

1) Why did the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) buy the property first, then turn around and sell it to MFWP?

When Premier Bank owned and listed the property, RMEF recognized the conservation value of the parcel and acted quickly to put the property under option, purchase, and hold it to give time for MFWP to go through its public process. RMEF is assuming all risk as MFWP may not receive final approval to purchase the land. Then RMEF would have to look for another buyer.

2) Does the appraised value include all the buildings?

The price did not include the house on the property, which RMEF sold separately. The appraisal did include the two outbuildings.

Clarifications:

Post-publication, legal review clarified the acreage of the current Wall Creek WMA. The current deeded acreage is 6,148.72 with lease holdings on 918.39 acres of DNRC land. The draft EA had estimated the current deeded acreage at 6,557 (page 6 and page 7).

Final Environmental Assessment

Based on public comment, there are no necessary modifications to the draft environmental assessment. That draft along with the clarifications in this Decision Notice will serve as the final environmental assessment for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the environmental assessment and public comment, I choose preferred Alternative B, purchase of the 630.12 acres and incorporation into WCWMA.

I find there are no negative impacts on the human and physical environment associated with the selected Alternative B. Therefore, I conclude that the environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis and that an environmental impact statement is not required.



Sam B. Sheppard
MFWP Region 3 Supervisor
Bozeman, MT
October 21, 2015